

Jeopardy Assessment

Proposed Incidental Take Authorization: Great River State Trail – Winona Connector (ITA 329)

Species: Blanchard's Cricket Frog

Location: Buffalo County

Background

Project Information

This project involves constructing a new trail alongside State Highway 54/35, within the highway right of way, adjacent to the backwaters of the Mississippi River. Beginning at the Buffalo Town Park, the trail corridor follows the highway then connects to abandoned railroad embankment on the west end. A bridge deck will be placed on the remnant bridge abutments to cross the backwaters. At the BNSF railroad, a new trail bridge will be built over the track and land on abandoned section of old State Highway 54 and continue to Aghaming Park in the City of Winona.

Species Information

The Blanchard's cricket frog (*Acris blanchardi*), an endangered species in Wisconsin, prefers ponds, lakes, and a variety of habitats along and adjacent to streams and rivers including, marshes, fens, sedge meadows, low prairies, and exposed mud flats. The species tends to breed in quiet water (no or low flow) and may also move from streams and rivers to adjacent wetlands and ponds. Cricket frogs cannot tolerate freezing or complete inundation for more than 24 hours during the winter and thus seek a variety of microhabitats that provide suitable overwintering conditions, including crayfish burrows, small mammal burrows, rotted-out root channels, seepage areas where groundwater flow prevents freezing at the surface or spaces created by sloughing streambanks. Cricket frogs are active from early March through November. Breeding can occur from mid-May through mid-August, with some larvae not transforming until late September.

Conservation Measures

The following measures apply only for the areas of delineated suitable habitat (areas of both permanent and temporary disturbance). No measures related to the cricket frog are required in the areas not delineated as suitable habitat.

1. All project-related disturbance impacting standing water must take place during the frog's active season (April 8-October 15), but outside of the frog's breeding season (May 20-August 15). This results in a window of April 8-May 19 and August 16-October 15.
2. All project-related disturbance not impacting standing water (e.g., uplands) must take place during the frog's active season (April 8-October 15), with no restrictions related to the breeding season.
3. Cricket frog removals will be conducted by a qualified biologist prior to project-related disturbance. To enable locating the frogs, the vegetation will be mowed to a height of 6-inches or less by use of non-suction mowing equipment.
4. For riprap and stream crossing projects, cricket frog removals will be conducted in the disturbance footprint by an environmental monitor prior to each work day/restoration activity. All cricket frogs (and preferably other amphibians and reptiles) found will be immediately removed from the disturbance area and relocated to suitable habitat at least 100 meters downstream from the project site. If cricket frogs are found on the first walk-through of the area, a second walk-through will be

conducted. This process should continue until the biologist feels confident he/she has removed as many cricket frogs as possible from the disturbance area. All cricket frogs removed will be recorded (total number removed per walk-through, i.e., 2 cricket frogs removed on first walk-through, 1 cricket frog removed on second walk-through and 0 cricket frogs removed on third walk-through) and reported to the Endangered Resources Review Program (DNRERReview@wi.gov) on a weekly basis.

5. The environmental monitor must have field experience with the cricket frog and its habitat and possess a valid Endangered/Threatened (E/T) Permit or similar authorization for cricket frog removals.
6. All dead Blanchard's cricket frog found on site throughout the course of the project must be recorded (species, approximate age, possible cause of death), photographed, and reported to the Endangered Resources Review Program (DNRERReview@wi.gov) at the conclusion of the project.
7. Plastic or polypropylene netting associated with erosion matting (also known as an erosion control blanket or erosion mesh netting) without independent movement of strands can easily entrap snakes and other wildlife moving through the area, and cause dehydration, desiccation, and eventually mortality. Biodegradable jute/twine netting with the "leno" or "gauze" weave (contains strands that are able to move independently) has the least impact on snakes. If erosion matting will be used for this project, use the following matting (or something similar): American Excelsior "FibreNet" or "NetFree" products; East Coast Erosion biodegradable jute products; Erosion Tech biodegradable jute products; ErosionControlBlanket.com biodegradable leno weave products; North American Green S75BN, S150BN, SC150BN or C125BN; or Western Excelsior "All Natural" products.
8. Upon completion of the project, all areas of temporary disturbance will be restored to pre-existing (or better) conditions.
9. For instream work, turbidity will be minimized by use of appropriate erosion control best management practices. These include turbidity barrier, erosion matting (as noted above), mulch with temporary seeding and silt fence.
10. All riprap above the OHWM must be top-dressed with 6" of soil and seeded.
11. Any areas of exposed soil will be seeded to DOT seed mixture #75.
12. A total of 0.37 acres of suitable cricket frog habitat will be lost as a result of this project. To mitigate for this loss, existing woody vegetation near the project site will be removed to restore habitat for the cricket frog. Mitigation will occur at 2:1 ratio, therefore 0.74 acres of habitat will be restored.
13. Minor changes can be made to this Conservation Plan due to unforeseen circumstances if agreed upon in writing (e.g., email correspondence) by the applicant and WI DNR's ER Transportation Liaison.

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The proposed activity will minimize and mitigate impacts to the Blanchard's cricket frog and as a result, we anticipate that take of the cricket frog will be low. The department has determined that the proposed activity is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence and recovery of the cricket frog, or the whole plant-animal community of which it is a part, within this state and the activity is not likely to result in the destruction or adverse modification of a habitat that is critical to the continued existence of the endangered species within the state. The department has also determined that the proposed activity provides a benefit to public health, safety or welfare that justifies the activity.